

scores a key issue related to growing debt levels: *risk*. The increasing use of loans has shifted a greater amount of risk to students and their families. Ultimately, they are responsible for paying back the money they owe, but their ability to do so depends largely on whether the student earns a college degree.

With students and their families taking on more risk as they take out loans to pay for higher education, it is important to consider how well colleges are serving students. Are students supported enough to have a fair chance at reaping the promised benefits of a college degree? Too often in higher education, students and their families are making decisions without adequate and comparable information about their chances for success.

The performance of colleges must be measured and communicated in order to help inform students of their options. Though it is a complicated issue, the most common measure is graduation rates, and there are already several efforts to make this information available online. One such effort is College Results Online (<http://www.collegeresults.org/>), which allows families to examine overall institutional graduation rates as well as those for diverse groups of students. Visitors to the site can also compare the graduation rates of an institution to those of other colleges or universities in its peer group. Comparing schools with similar student bodies, there are large differences in graduation rates. This suggests that institutional actions, policies and programs can matter in the outcomes of students, and these kinds of differences should be further publicized and investigated. Beyond graduation rates, there are

other important issues to consider and measure, including what students actually learn in college. Many colleges are currently developing instruments to reflect learning such as student portfolios or departmental exams that test subject matter. Other schools instead focus on the passage rates of programs leading to certification exams, such as nursing and teaching.

These ideas are consistent with the conclusions of the national Commission on the Future of Higher Education, assembled by Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings. The commission has called for a “robust culture of accountability and transparency.” The final recommendations include developing “new systems of data measurement and a publicly available information database with comparable college information,” which would help students and families gain access to the information they need to make better decisions.

Given that the debt burden has increased so rapidly in such a short period of time, the consequences of borrowing heavily to pay for college are not yet fully understood. However, the adverse consequences for students who do not finish their college degrees are clear. Growing expectations that students will incur debt to pay for their educations must be met with increased information about what students are buying.

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Test the Spellings Commission's Assumptions

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It's hard to argue with much of the report from the national Commission on the Future of Higher Education. Many of its conclusions and recommendations echo criticisms that have been leveled at higher education for years, and others borrow from reforms already underway on various campuses. Still, some of the assumptions upon which the Spellings Commission report is based need further examination.

One of these assumptions is that higher education, responding to government directives, has the ability to chart its own future. In reality, many of the issues highlighted by the commission report are beyond the control or influence of higher education institutions. If recommended reforms in financial aid distribution and allocation are to occur, for example, Congress and federal agencies, not higher education, will have to take

the lead. Indeed, higher education leaders are acutely aware of the fact that the gap between what students receive through the Pell Grant program and what is needed to cover their costs is growing exponentially, with particularly grave consequences for lower-income students at community colleges. Despite years of urging from colleges and universities to pay attention to this growing gap, nothing has happened. And it seems unlikely that something will happen now since the commission's recommendation to significantly increase the maximum Pell Grant has not been pushed by the education secretary.

Another assumption is that we can solve the problems of college access and affordability by forcing institutions to become more productive and thereby control costs. It is impossible to increase higher education productivity without the cooperation of faculty in particular. Yet

nothing in the Spellings Commission report provides a traditional, full-time faculty member with a reason to buy into its vision of “innovation,” including its call to change the academic calendar. The business mentality that is prominent in the commission’s discussion of productivity is suspect in much of the professoriate and would be actively resisted. We have to figure out a different way of talking *with* college faculty, rather than *at* them, if productivity is to be enhanced.

The commission also assumes that providing data will make higher education more accountable and allow colleges to be judged on performance, rather than reputation. Providing more data so students can make more informed choices about how to spend their tuition dollars make sense. But all the data in the world will not convince someone that it is better to attend a community college or a state university than it is to attend Harvard or Yale, regardless of the cost. People strive to belong to groups that are difficult to get into. The belief that high cost equates to quality education keeps many students in debt unnecessarily.

Although the commission wisely calls for better alignment with K-12 as a way to address the learning gap between high school and college, the final report says little about teacher education—arguably the most important topic higher education can address in determining how well students are prepared when they reach college.

In the end, while the Spellings Commission is right in recommending that higher education become better aligned with K-12 systems and that a college education remain accessible and affordable, its findings and recommendations may have little relevance to the future of New England higher education. The commission focuses significantly on the economic value of higher education, and indeed students want a “reward” from college education and training. They want their college credential to open up new opportunities. So why should young

“Colleges and universities have few incentives to contain costs because prestige is often measured by resources, and managers who hold down spending risk losing their academic reputations.”

—A Test of Leadership, Commission on the Future of Higher Education

“It is especially regrettable that the commission’s report focuses almost exclusively on workforce preparation, narrowly defined. The longstanding and distinctively American goal of preparing students for engaged citizenship is ignored entirely by the commission.”

—Statement by Association of American Colleges and Universities

people go to college in a region where at the end of the line they will find fewer jobs that pay them enough to keep up with the region’s monstrous cost of living?

The data already show that the New England states in which jobs are being created (Vermont, Maine, New Hampshire) are seeing college enrollments go up. The states in which jobs are not being created to the same extent (Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island) are experiencing either flat or lower enrollments. Educators need to start demanding that our states do a better job of planning for the future. We must help address issues such as transportation, health care, and housing as well as the educational standards that will help meet the needs of an increasingly complex world. In other words, if the sweeping national higher education reforms recommended by the Spellings Commission are to have any impact in New England, the economic and social problems facing New England must be resolved too.

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Resist Simplistic Measures of Success

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When I testified last year before the national Commission on the Future of Higher Education created by U.S. Education Secretary Margaret Spellings, I congratulated the commission for training a spotlight on the key issues of affordability, accessibility and accountability, while pointing out what I felt were some of the shortcomings of the metrics that purport to measure these.

I particularly object to the notion that college is simply high school for older kids. Approaches that

have been used widely in the schools—such as high-stakes testing of general achievement—have limited utility in colleges where our academic aims and programs are far more diverse.

Furthermore, metrics that are often cited in discussions of where higher education needs to improve may have exactly the opposite effect to that intended. The Spellings Commission and others speak of a need for universities to improve their graduation rates, but the metric often cited to measure this aspect of college success is outmoded and could actually lead to much lower accessibility, affordability and completion.